**Annotated Text Set: Asian North American Literature**

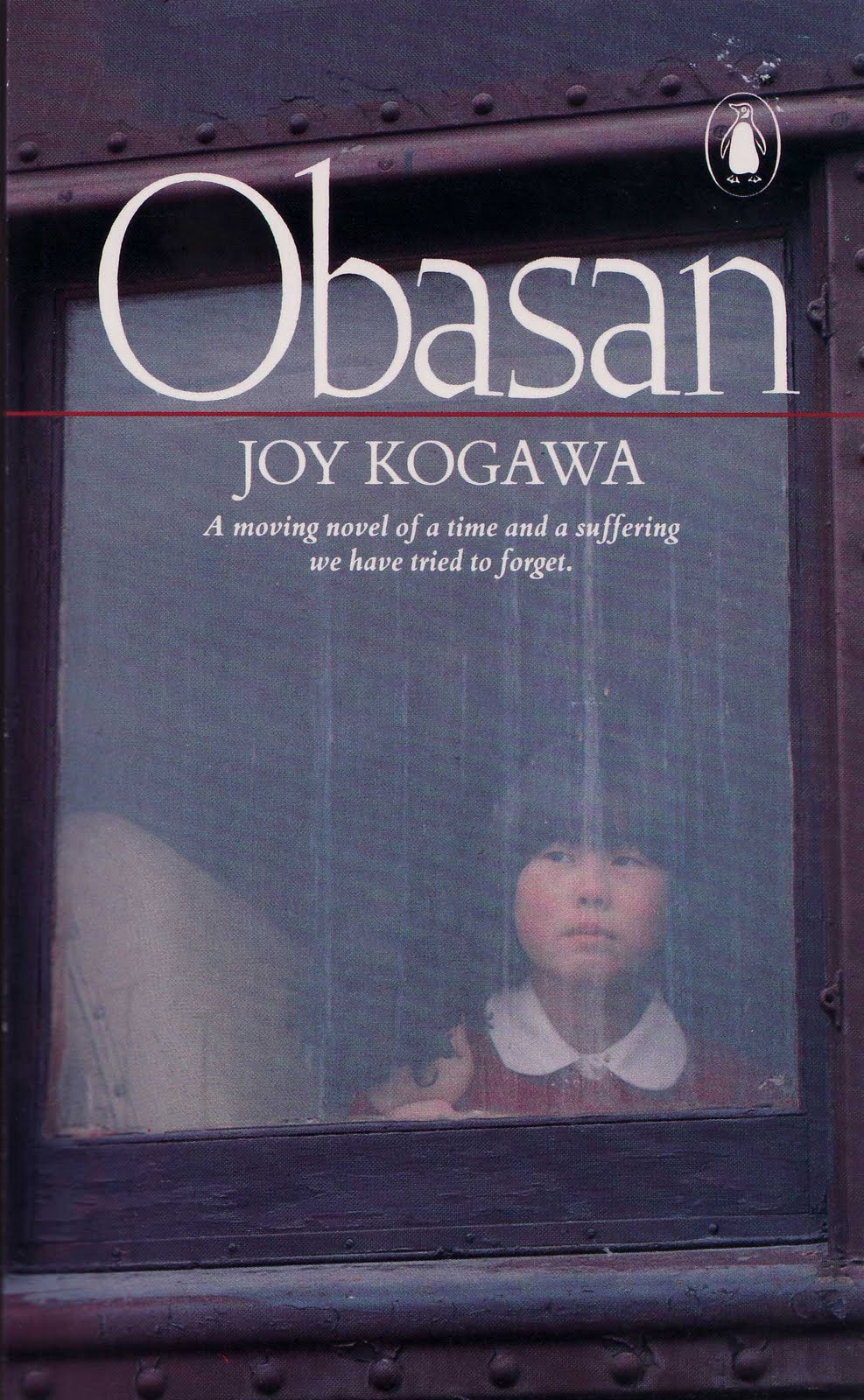
**Michael Kim**

**Introduction**

For a person living in Toronto, it is difficult to separate everyday life from the influences of Asia. Wherever one goes, there is sure to be cuisine, culture, and people from Asia that has great impact on this city. The history of Asian influences on the Western culture (let alone Canadian culture) goes back hundreds of years ago, thanks to trade between the East and the West. It is surprising that, despite considerable Asian influences on the culture, schools in the West rarely look at Asian texts. Partly because of my own ethnic background, and partly because of the large number of East Asians that populated my high school, I focused mainly on East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) texts, but included some other Asian texts as well. This limitation also arises from my personal ignorance of South Asian literature, of which there are many quality works.

To make these Asian influences relevant to Canadian students, I focused on works whose authors have written in English. In this sense, I am not just looking at Asian culture and identities, but also how they interact and respond to North American culture (some authors are American). Asian North American literature is a relatively small but growing field. In many instances it discusses issues of racism, language, conflicted identities, etc. It would be a true privilege to share any and all of these texts with my future students.

**1) Novel as Text**

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**Obasan – Joy Kogawa**

Obasan is already a part of the canon of Asian Canadian literature; it addresses the very sensitive issue of Canada’s internment and persecution of its citizens of Japanese descent during WWII. The story is orientated around Naomi Nakane, a schoolteacher in Cecil, Alberta. The death of her uncle leads her to take care of her widowed aunt Aya, whom she calls “Obasan,” the Japanese word for aunt. The time spent with her aunt gives Naomi the opportunity to reflect on the history of the Japanese internment in Canada.

Obasan is included in my text set because it explores both Canadian history and the government’s treatment of its Japanese-descent citizens, but also explores the identity of Japanese Canadians in today’s society. A landmark literary work, Obasan addresses a historical and social issue that is often overlooked and forgotten in today’s Canadian society.

**2) Picture as Text**

**十長生圖 (Ship Jang Saeng Do)**

When you see the picture on the left, can you tell that it is from an Eastern culture? Ship Jang Saeng Do is a visual representation of ten things in nature that lives the longest lives. These things include the sun, the moon, mountains, water, rocks, pine trees, clouds, elixir of life (herbs and roots), tortoises, cranes, and deer. This particular picture also depicts peaches as a symbol of long life. Ship Jang Saeng Do refers to any picture that portrays these ten symbols of long life, and artists have traditionally been commissioned by the royalty or nobility to create them for prosperity and long life.

In an effort to study the culture of Asian North American identity and experience, it is important to return to the roots of Asian culture and history. What are the differences between Eastern and Western values in life? In art? Studying the Ship Jang Saeng Do can help students in both understanding the East Asian culture (namely Chinese and Korean, in this case), and study symbolism. Why did the artists pick these symbols to represent long life? It creates excellent opportunities for students to study symbolism in visual arts, as a precedent for studying symbolism in literature.

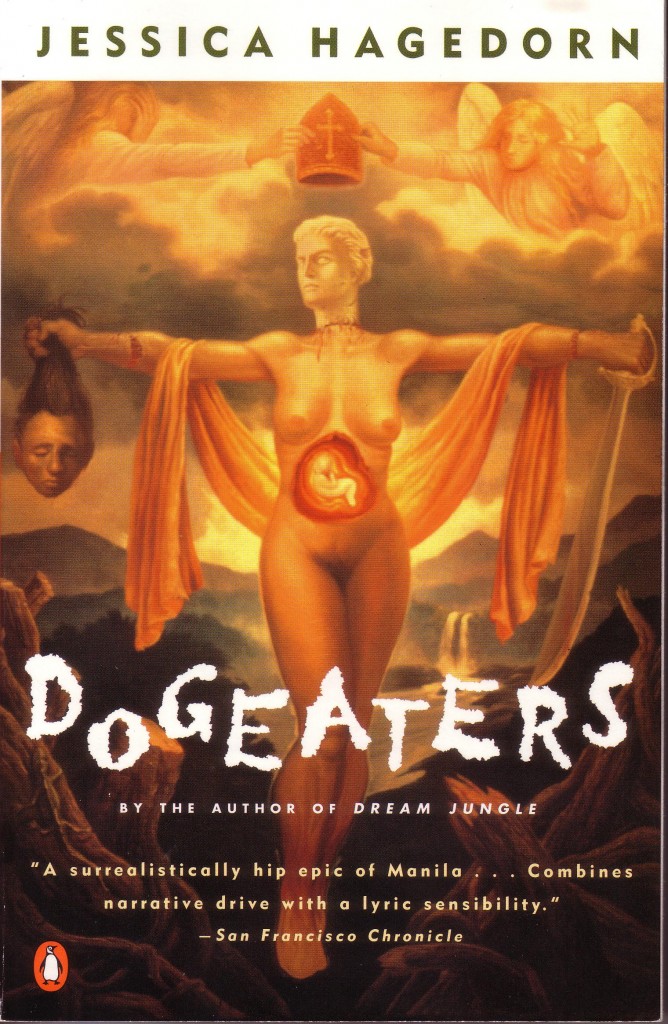
**3) Mythology as Text**

**Chinese Myth of Pangu**

Chinese mythology is an amalgamation of historical records, folktales, and religious stories that originate from China. One specific myth is the creation story of Pangu. In the beginning there was darkness and Chaos ruled. In the darkness there was an egg, inside the egg was the giant Pangu. He began to grow and grow, and eventually broke the egg. The heavier pieces of the egg sunk to form the earth, and the lighter pieces floated up to form the sky. Afraid that the earth and sky might meld again, he held them apart, and continued to grow, until they were completely apart. Then, exhausted, he lied down and died, and his flesh, organs, and bones became the earth’s waters, mountains, and living things.

In schools, mythology is often approached from the Western tradition of classical mythology. Sometimes Celtic or Nordic mythology is included, but very little attention shown to Asian mythology. The story of Pangu, amongst other Asian mythical stories, shows how creation stories are common in many different cultures, East and West. Studying mythology of different cultures also help students connect to other cultures outside of what they have been exposed to.

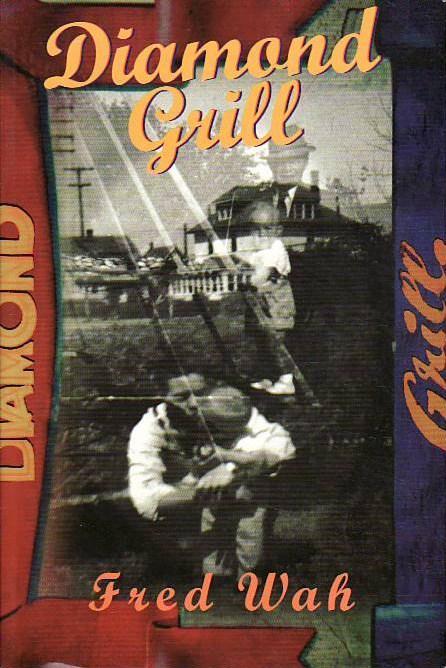
**4) Play as Text**

**Dogeaters by Jessica Hagedorn**

Dogeaters was originally a novel written by Jessica Hagedorn, and was adapted into a play by the same author. Dogeaters tells the stories of different characters in the Philippines. A dictator’s rule is challenged by leftists, throwing the country into turmoil and strife. The story follows the lives of rich, privileged families, as well as characters like Joey Sands, a DJ at a gay bar and a male prostitute. The different plot-lines are brought together over events like the “Young Miss Philippines” beauty pageant, and the assassination of a human rights activist.

Dogeaters, the play, reflects on what it means to be living in Philippines, where culture is heavily influenced by American culture and classism is framing the reality of everyday life. Those with money are able to afford luxuries, while others are struggling to survive. The dramatic script of Dogeaters will enable students to experience the text on stage, and ask critical questions about their own lives in Canada compared to life in the Philippines.

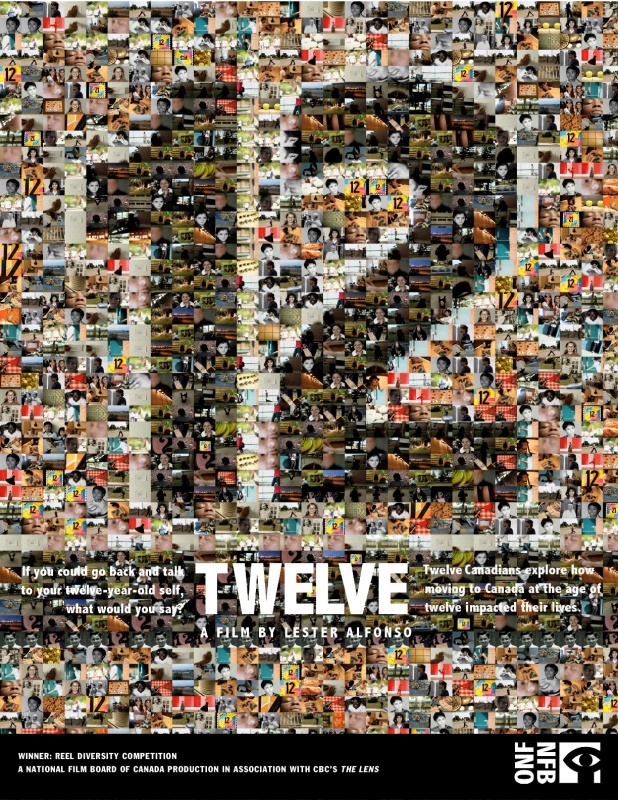
**5) Poetry and Prose-poetry as Text**

**Diamond Grill by Fred Wah**

Diamond Grill is a compilation of poems and prosaic poems by the Canadian author, Fred Wah. Born of a Chinese-Scots-Irish Father and a Swedish-born Canadian mother, Fred Wah finds his identity questioned and threatened by many different things. Diamond Grill is the name of Wah’s father’s restaurant, the locale around which the works in the collection are centered.

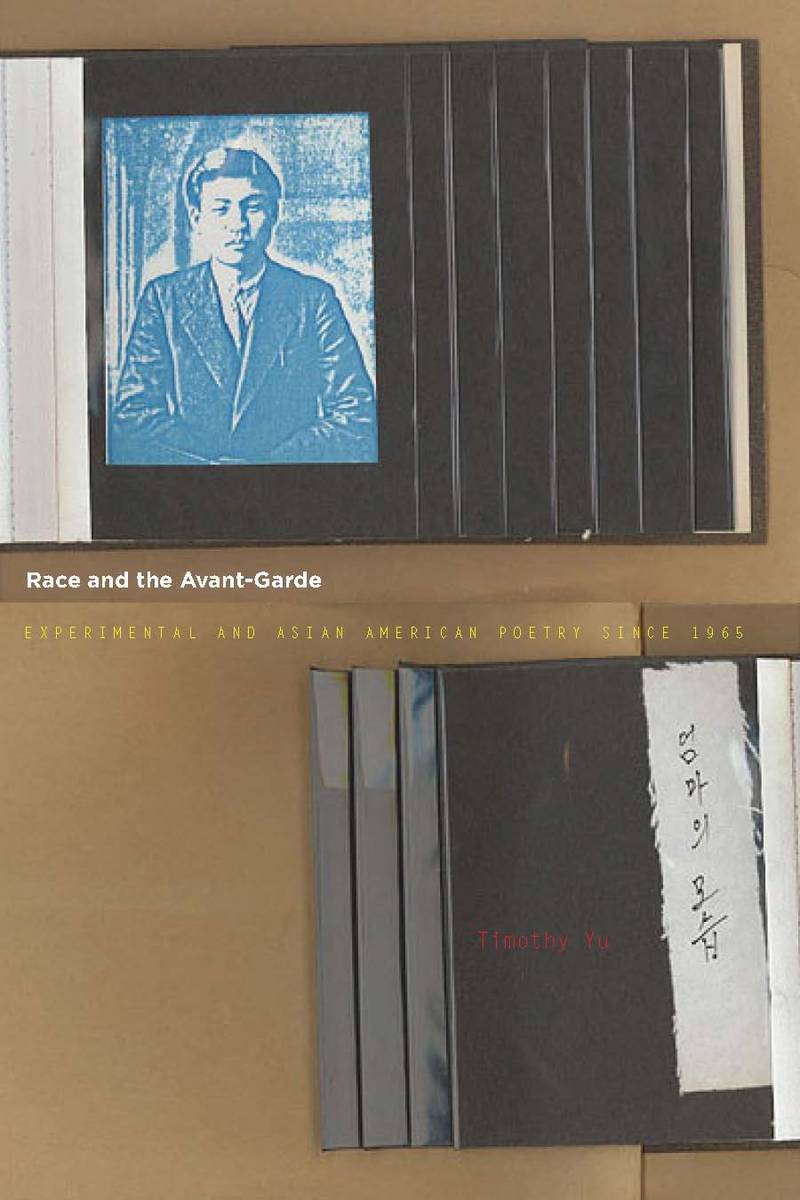
Diamond Grill is relevant in Asian North American literature because of the themes and issues it raises. Behind the shiny polish of the café hides the ugly truth of racism: from the Chinese for being white, and from the whites for being Chinese. Wah’s poetry and prose-poetry is unique in addressing the issue of racism because of his mixed background. Diamond Grill explores how Wah’s Canadian identity was both shaped and threatened by the lines people put between races, a relevant issue for a modern Canadian student by any standard.

**6) Movie as Text (Media)**

**Twelve by Lester Alfonso**

Lester Alfonso came to Canada from the Philippines when he was twelve. The documentary features other immigrants who also came to Canada at the age of twelve. The film addresses issues of identity and cultural diversity, asking the question, "if you can go back and speak to your 12-year-old self, what would you say?" Lester's film company is called Original Plastic.

Twelve is an excellent documentary to be used as a text in any Canadian classroom. It directly links Asian and Canadian culture through the vision of its director, but at the same time, addresses the experiences of immigrants from other continents. It is an indispensable resource to be used as a discussion starter for Canadian students, many of whom are immigrants, or have friends who are immigrants.

**7) Literary Criticism as Text (Non-fiction)**

**Race and the Avant-Garde by Timothy Yu**

Professor Yu is a scholar in English and Asian American studies. This particular publication deals with race, juxtaposing works of experimental language poets and Asian American poets. The work looks into the 1960s, exploring how Asian American literature emerged alongside the avant-garde, studying the poetry of Allen Ginsberg, Ron Silliman, and John Yau, etc.

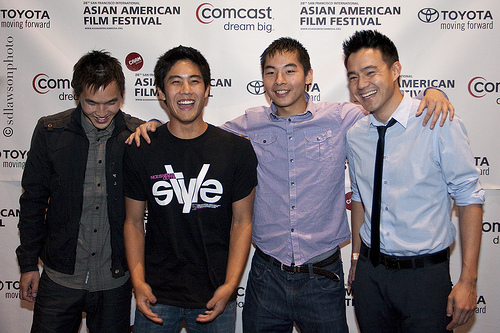
This text is suitable for a mature, senior class, because literary criticism is not an easy resource to read in high school without the proper preparation. Yu’s work approaches Asian American works with the avant-garde perspective in mind. It attempts to highlight the major differences and similarities between Asian American poetry and poetry by non-Asian Americans. Because it compares and contrasts the cultures represented by these works, Yu’s criticism is a good piece of text to work with students.

**8) Food as Text**

**Curry and Spices**

Curry and spices used to make it are not just food. They represent culture, dietary practices, history, and identities of many people in many different countries. In the West, spices were once considered one of the most valuable trade commodities from the East. Through their ability to flavour bland European foods with zest, they were largely sought after. Over time, curry spread out, expanding all over Asia, and eventually beyond the continent’s borders. Today, curry exists in many forms and versions in many different places, and is loved by many as hearty, wholesome, and delicious food.

Curry and spices is just one example of how food can be studied as a text. Food tells a story. It tells a story of where materials come from, and speaks volumes about the culture that cooks it through the way that it is prepared. Food in every country is different, so it is not surprising that East and West food cultures are entirely different. Sometimes unusual or exotic foods can appal others who are not used to such things. Yet, because everybody has to eat, food creates a common ground on which understanding can be fostered. There are many practical ways food can be part of students’ learning in an English class, whether students are learning about the history of Asian foods or materials, or reading a recipe on how to prepare a dish. And really, who is not interested in food? Even as I am writing this, I cannot take my peripheral vision off the picture above.

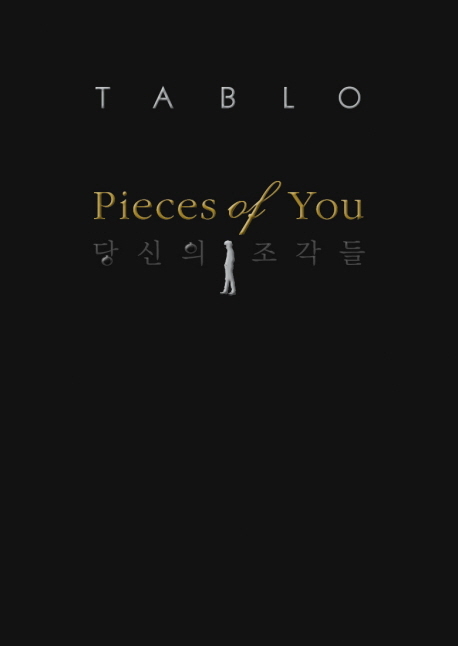
**9) New Media as Text**

**YouTubers (from left) Wesley Chan (WongFu Productions), Ryan Higa (nigahiga), Kevin Wu (kevjumba), and Philip Wang (WongFu Productions)**

Mass media has always been used to promote artists and products. With the Internet, many independent artists have the ability to share their works easily, reaching out to more people than it ever was possible. Independent Asian American artists like the four people above create and upload YouTube videos which are watched by millions of people worldwide. People like Ryan Higa or Kevin Wu reach their audiences through humour and popular subject matter of their blogs and videos, while people like Wesley Chan and Philip Wang, creators of their own independent film company WongFu Productions, along with their colleague Ted Fu (not in picture), sometimes deal with more artistic and serious topics.

Collaborating online in each other’s projects, these young Asian American members of the new media embody the cultures of the Asian American youths. Their videos reach out to many Asian communities throughout America, and even Canada. For example, WongFu Productions has screened original films in many Canadian universities, collaborating with Asian student groups in different cities. The videos and movies, and other media these artists create are all accessible on YouTube, and the culture they both simultaneously create and experience can be studied through their works.

**10) Short Stories as Text**



**Pieces of You by Tablo (Daniel Armand Lee)**

Pieces of You is a collection of short stories written in English by Daniel Armand Lee. Most of them were written during the time when Lee was studying creative writing at Stanford University. As Lee is a musician, some stories have direct or indirect connections to music or art. They explore the human condition in relation to the hostile urban world, where the desire to possess money and gain social power threatens love between friends, family, and lovers.

Daniel Armand Lee is also known as Tablo, and is a hip-hop and rap artist in South Korea. His group is called Epik High. Tablo, Lee, has grew up in many different places, including Canada, because of his father’s job. Having received a degree in English literature from Stanford University, he often incorporates profound political and social criticism in the lyrics of his songs. His writing is acclaimed by his many fans, who also love the lyrics he writes about relationships, and everyday life in today’s society. He writes and performs in both English and Korean. His work will be a good text to study as the subject matter deals with things that are relevant to students, like love, friendships, racial issues, criticisms of materialistic or hedonistic values, etc.